

## **Something to Talk About: Lessons of Language and Literacy from a Tutorial Pilot Program**

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### **Abstract**

*This article describes a study conducted to determine evidence of key variables of literacy development and language acquisition, based on tutor's lessons focusing on books and conversations about books and tutee's questions. During one semester, university students tutored students from third to fifth grade, creating learning communities incorporating language and literate conversations, discussions about learning, and thinking/comprehension strategies into each tutorial session, based on the needs of each student, as determined by the homeroom teacher. Conversations about books and topics were determined by student interest. Tutors were prepared with eight preparation sessions. Tutors noted student literacy behaviors in journals, providing information of literate conversations, reading involvement of English Learners and improved literacy skills and strategies in tutored students. Tables show evidence of engaged students, thinking, talking about books, comprehending and learning new information.*

**Key Words:** Literate Conversations, Oral Language Development, Language Acquisition

### **1) Introduction**

Language is a key building block of any culture, enabling people within a culture to communicate effectively for specific needs. When a culture has multiple languages present- making meaning can take more time. A classroom of learners is a community that has a unique culture with numerous students from a wide variety of backgrounds, demographics, economic statuses, cultures, and sometimes languages, thus bringing varied experiences and ideas about what school and literacy should look and sound like. This make-up of different students provides teachers a rich blend of perspectives to use to create contexts of meaning for each learner. Engaging every learner and every family in the process of developing a culture for literacy can positively impact the learning experiences for all involved. Teachers who are strategic in planning and building learning relationships with students, caregivers, and families create trust levels that facilitate learning, where students are willing to take learning risks in the class. The implications of teachers creating a community for learning that is differentiated for English Learners, students who may be struggling in their literacy development, and other students are important to note. A supportive literate environment assists all students in learning content.

### **2) Teacher Knowledge About Students**

Educators who equip themselves with a strong understanding of each student in the class, their background, home language, family, literacy development of caregivers, and expectations for learning have a stronger potential for developing learning relationships, based on each student's information. This information can help the teacher design and develop a strategic literacy plan of instruction to act as an instructional guide to follow when teaching. This literacy plan is designed and differentiated around the literacy learning needs of each student and helps the teacher customize learning. A strong understanding of each student includes knowing each student's likes, dislikes, reading habits, etc. Gathering this information can be done in a variety of ways including student interviews and surveys, parent surveys, conversations, and observations. Identifying the variables that make up a student's schema can help a teacher best meet the student's learning needs.

### **Components in Each Student's Background:**

Each student has components from their background or history that contribute to how they develop literacy and communication skills. These include home language, family, and expectations for learning.

**Home Language:** A student's language or first language is a critical component in their literacy development. If the home language is unknown, not appreciated or used as a baseline of future language learning, second language acquisition may take longer.

**Family:** Knowing each student's family story gives an educator a powerful tool for understanding the student and how to motivate and address the specific learning needs that the student currently has and what the student needs to help in the progression of learning.

The literacy development of caregivers is a key consideration for teachers as caregivers are invited to participate and become more involved in the school to home connection. Students often are influenced by multiple people in the course of the school day. Teachers equipped with the knowledge of those involved in the student's day, can engage multiple people in the literacy loop. For example, if a middle school student is driven to school by an older sibling, then attends school, and rides the bus to the home of other relatives until a parent picks him/her up after work; all of the people throughout the day have an impact on the student. The languages spoken, the study area(s), music, activities, emotional climate, all play a role in how the student views education, literacy and how he/she views and accomplishes homework or literacy activities assigned.

**Expectations of learning-** Expectations of learning are part of the cultural environment in the home environment of the student. Expectations are determined by many factors, including the educational level of the parents and caregivers, type of school the student attends, neighborhood the school is located, the teacher of record (home room teacher), and the school/ district where the student attends school.

### **3) *Creating Environments that support English Learners:***

It takes time to create a learning environment where every student feels comfortable to contribute. Teachers who establish routines and procedures for classroom management and a structured learning environment that encourages each student to think and talk- thus contributing to the class learning, often have more productive learning sessions. Establishing routines and procedures takes planning and time to effectively implement. Students need to be given opportunities to practice expected behaviors repeatedly. Literacy learning activities that allow students to think and talk about what is being learned in the classroom are key variables in an effective literacy learning environment.

Curriculum is an important tool to building such an environment. How the content is taught is just as important- the teacher must design ways to invite the shyest or most reluctant learner to participate in the class discussions. Sharing quality literature is a key way to establish routines and procedures in a classroom. When a teacher designs a school day around predictable literate events that include times that literature is heard in a variety of ways, students become accustomed to the flow and rhythm of the day. For example, if a teacher begins the day with a read aloud every day, followed by guided reading sessions, and if students are given opportunities to read from their browsing boxes at a specific time daily, they will have books to talk about in sharing time. Reading Workshop and Writing Workshop are excellent avenues to build literacy development and to help students find their literate voice. This may seem like a simple task, but can become complicated when a teacher has twenty-five or more students, each with different levels of English proficiency and different levels of literacy development.

### **4) *Implications For Grades 3 and Above***

For classrooms with older students from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and beyond, literacy circles, literacy studies, book clubs, book discussions and author studies all provide discussions about books. Multiple genres are needed to address the varied interests in your classroom. For teachers who have students that change classes throughout the day, it can be challenging to provide authentic and customized literacy instruction for every student. However, when the effort and time is taken to create a literacy learning environment in each class section, deeper and more authentic literacy learning is possible. Although finding time is a challenge, middle and high school teachers have a distinct advantage over early grade teachers in that middle and high school students usually know what they are interested. Elementary teachers have to scaffold a wide variety of lessons to build schema about multiple genres. By the time a student gets to middle or high school, the students should be able to know and communicate their likes and dislikes in literature, but may be reluctant to do so. Often middle school learners do not feel compelled to share their thoughts within a classroom environment. Teachers who design and create an environment conducive for literacy learning have better chances of engaging all students. A risk-free sharing environment is a result of establishing a community where students respect and relate to each other.

Scheduling time for students to share their thoughts, ideas, and reactions to books and to what is being learned can increase learning for all students. Literate conversations where students are exchanging and discussing ideas are powerful teaching tools. Engaging middle and high school students to participate often requires a teacher to revisit the earlier stages of language and literacy development in order to catch students who may be struggling with new genres, unfamiliar text structures, and vocabulary.

Listening to literature being read aloud is a powerful tool to integrate language development and literacy skills. It is well worth the time of the teacher to read from multiple genres and authors to model what different types of books and genres sound like. Explaining the purposes of each type of genre can help students determine which types of books they prefer. A classroom library that has a well-stocked library with a variety of books that address the interests of the students is a powerful resource to spark reading and conversations about books. Time allocated to reading during school and books provided for out of school reading are two powerful tools in building reading skills of comprehension, thinking, and fluency. These efforts will benefit all learners within a class, especially English Learners.

The four behaviors noted below can also be integrated by teachers to foster language development for English Learners as they learn new content from a variety of genres and types of resources. According to Paula Menyuk, Ed. D. (1999), pivotal variables in the development of language development are:

- (1) Providing ample opportunities for communication interaction.
- (2) Talking about what has the child's attention.
- (3) Requiring more sophisticated responses when the child gives evidence of being able to be more sophisticated.
- (4) Being contingent in interactions to affirm the child's naming of objects and events. From: Reading and Linguistic Development by Paula Menyuk, Ed. D.

Students of all ages benefit from these four steps which reinforce language development. Though these steps address early language development, they are relevant and impact students of all ages, specifically as new content, text structures and genres are introduced. It can be noted that English Learners may regress to earlier stages of language development as content becomes more difficult and text structures are more demanding, varied, and in different genres. The suggested steps for each stage are usually identified with the acquisition of the language itself. The use of these steps can be incorporated support and scaffold meaning for students as they transition into different genres of literature that require more advanced reading, comprehension, and synthesizing. Higher order thinking skills require the ability to process the language of the printed word. As texts become more complex with multiple layers of meanings- students need to be able to read text and understand and determine the author's purpose (to persuade, to inform, to entertain). Teaching students to analyze texts will benefit all students in the class, regardless of their first language, or literacy development level. Additionally, Donald Leu has noted five key ways that readers in the twenty-first century are to read online information. These skills are applicable to all students, but are particularly important to struggling readers and English Learners who may have difficulty with the advanced language and literacy expectations.

- 1) Identify Important Questions
- 2) Locate Information
- 3) Critically Evaluate Information
- 4) Synthesize Information
- 5) Communicate

Conversations and oral language development and practice are critical variables in language acquisition and development. It is helpful to know three stages of reading development emergent readers, early readers, and newly fluent readers, in order to understand how reading and literacy development can benefit language development. If a teacher realizes how to design instruction to scaffold literacy and language- time and efforts are maximized. The learning is reciprocal between the two, with each contributing to the other. When a student is given opportunities to experience books being read and the language of texts is heard through repeated readings, and then is encouraged to retell the stories and discuss characters, settings, plot, problems and solutions within stories, then students are seeing and hearing literate language in a class setting. The purpose of this pilot study was to see if there would be evidence of key variables of literacy development and language acquisition, based on tutor's lessons focusing on books and conversations about books and tutee's questions.

For one semester, university tutors from the School of Education, who were tutoring students from third to fifth grades, were given the challenge of creating learning communities described previously in this paper. Students were challenged to incorporate literate conversations, discussions about learning, and thinking/ comprehension strategies into each tutorial session. Tutorial sessions were to focus on the literacy learning needs of each student, as determined by the homeroom teacher. Conversations about books and topics the student was interested in were encouraged during each tutorial setting. Tutors had been prepared with eight preparation sessions prior to the start of tutoring. Reading, comprehension, and language strategies were shared with tutors. The following reading development stages were also given. Examples of the tutor's reflections are noted in the following pages. Tutors recorded their findings in reflection journals, keeping notes about their observations and student learning behaviors. This pilot study provided interesting information to how conversations about literacy and books increased the involvement of English Learners and improved literacy skills and strategies in students who were struggling with literacy and who were also English Learners. There is evidence of students being engaged, thinking and talking about books, comprehending and learning new information. Talking, literate conversations and thinking about books are also noted in the examples below.

Stages of Reading Development from Preschool & Primary Literacy (2013). Neel, J.
<b>Emergent Readers:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supported by parent(s), caregivers, family members for literacy</li> <li>• Are read to from an early age</li> <li>• Are familiar with a wide variety of books from multiple genres</li> <li>• Have experience sitting and actively listening to books</li> <li>• Are familiar with parts of a book, role of each part, &amp; purpose.</li> <li>• Know words and pictures, text, make meaning.</li> <li>• Listen actively</li> <li>• Listen for the tone and pitch of the reader's voice to make meaning</li> <li>• Recognize the cadence and rhythm of the language in the book. (page 108)</li> </ul>
<b>Early Readers:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transition &amp; develop more advanced literacy skills, building on skills learned and mastered in the emergent reading stage.</li> <li>• Develop favorites and request the same title(s) repeatedly.</li> <li>• Notice systems within the textual structures.</li> <li>• Begin to self-correct when the text does not make sense. Strategies include: searching, self-monitoring, cross-checking, and self-correction.</li> <li>• Recognize a mistake and attempts to correct it.</li> <li>• Read with phrasing and fluency. Pg. 108-109</li> </ul>
<b>Newly Fluent Readers:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate some skills from the emergent and early stages, adding new skills.</li> <li>• Are able to verbally retell the story with accuracy.</li> <li>• Are able to synthesize the story.</li> <li>• Are able to identify and describe the characters and sequence of the story.</li> <li>• Are able to infer meanings.</li> <li>• Are able to compare two or more stories.</li> <li>• Decode and understand new words.</li> </ul>

University tutors were encouraged to give students from grades 3-5 of thinking about what they wanted to compare, then were given a week to gather information. Students could choose any topic that was relevant to them and could select a graphic organizer to best reflect their findings. This activity allowed students to identify questions that were important to them as individuals, to locate their own information, and to critically evaluate the two items that were being compared. Students synthesized the information by talking about their mini-project with friends and family. Results were communicated in a summary statement.

Students and families enjoyed this type of assignment for the following reasons: (1) Students had a week to complete the assignment. (2) Caregivers could be involved in the activity. (3) The assignment was relevant. (4) Since the student could choose the items to compare- the cost was minimal. (5) Students enjoyed comparing their findings and charts. Lots of conversations were taking place about their findings as the week progressed.

Critical Thinking: Examples of student examples of tutoring.

**Table 1: Comparison of Two Yogurt Places:**

Orange Leaf	Same for Both	TCBY
No Sorbet Available	Fruit Toppings	Sorbet Available
More \$\$\$\$	Sprinkles	Cheaper \$\$
Better Toppings	Candy	Less Toppings

- Compare/Contrast summary statement:
- I like both places for yogurt. I like Orange Leaf for the toppings, but it costs more than TCBY. TCBY because I like sorbet at TCBY and Orange Leaf doesn't have sorbet.

**Table 2: Compare/ Contrast of Caramel and Cheese Popcorn:**

Caramel Popcorn:	Attributes for Both:	Cheese Popcorn:
Sweet	Popcorn	Cheesy
Sticks to your teeth	Comes in tins; bags	Salty
Caramel coating- outside	Christmas tins	Messy
Always a favorite	Special Occasions	Powdery cheese all over

- Compare/ Contrast Statement for Caramel and Cheese Popcorn:
- I like both caramel and cheese popcorn. I like caramel corn the best because of the taste. We usually get tins of popcorn from Wal-Mart after Thanksgiving and before Christmas. We eat popcorn when we play games at the holidays when our cousins come over. We don't see the tins out at other times of the year. This is a tradition for our family.

**Table 3: Comparing Cookies:**

Chocolate Chip Cookies from Subway	Chocolate Chip Cookies from Nestle Toll House Dough
Soft	Soft
Great Flavor	Smells So good the house smells like chocolate
Intense Chocolate Chip	Dirty Dishes- (This is a negative!)
More Expensive \$\$\$	Cheaper \$

Summary Statement: I like chocolate chip cookies from Subway that are homemade. Nestle Tollhouse cookies baked at home make the house smell good and the cookies are warm. I like the Nestle ones best because I can eat them with cold milk.

**Table 4: Compare/ Contrast Chips:**

Original Ruffles	Spicy Doritos
Salty	Spicy
Crunchy	Crunchy
Plain Color	Orange
Round; wavy	Triangle Bumpy

Summary Statement: I like both chips the same. I like to eat Original Ruffles with ham and cheese sandwiches. I like to eat Spicy Doritos as a snack after school. My mom buys the big sack of all different chips in little bags. My favorites are Ruffles and Spicy Doritos.

My sister likes Cool Ranch Doritos and Cheetos. It works because we each get what we like for our lunches and for snacks after school. Mom gets them at Sam's or Wal-Mart and packs our lunches for us. My lunch box is Superman; my sister's is just a plain pink one.

Reflection Journal Entries of Tutors:

- Tutor A's Reflection Journal:  
"Today was a fun day! My student really loves books and reading them to me. Today, we went over comprehension of stories, comprehension skills and then we read books. He also wrote his favorite part from a story we had read earlier. He really enjoys retelling and doesn't seem to mind the questions that I ask him. We discuss topics from the familiar and shared books that we read; as well as "off the wall" topics. He really enjoys learning about rocks, historical figures, and history."
- Tutor A's Reflection Journal:  
"We read several books and discussed the comprehension skills. He enjoyed the book Free Fall by David Weiner. This book is wordless and so fantastic! He loved being able to just see pictures and put into words about what is happening in the story. We had a blast discussing the book and what is happening on each page and what might happen next. He wanted to keep reading it."
- Tutor B's Reflection Journal:  
Question: Are students engaged?  
Yes! My student was engaged the entire tutorial time (60 minutes). She read the story The Name Quilt and then wrote her own story about a quilt. As an extension activity, we made a name quilt.  
Question: What did I do to prepare? I collected books for my tutee to pick from to read. I brought paper, markers, tape, and construction paper for her to use to make a quilt.  
Describe the teacher talk:  
I motivated the tutee by telling her we were going to read a story and make a quilt. I asked her some questions previewing the story. "This story is about a quilt, which is like a blanket. Do you have a special blanket at your house? Did anyone make your blanket for you? Let's do a picture walk to see if we can get any clues from the illustrations about the book. We talked about the pictures as we previewed the book with a strong picture walk; and then we read the book together. She was interested and liked the story."

Tutor C: List of Tutorial Activities for the week:

- Read familiar reading books: Because of Winn Dixie; Hank the Cow Dog.
- Read several Chris Van Allsburg books- Jumanji; Two Bad Ants.
- Poetry: Read poems and talked about poetic devices such as alliteration.
- Interactive Writing: Worked with math club to write our story "Our Kingdom".
- Comprehension: Story Web and Writing- test comprehension based on story; create story using web, based on pictures
- Scrabble- we played scrabble with vocabulary words and spelling words.
- Context Clues: Checked context clues with comprehension questions.

Tutor D: Reflection

Lesson Focus: Comprehension

Assessments: Reading Surveys, word list, comprehension passage

What surprised me about the tutorial lesson: My student recently began to enjoy reading!

My student knows 95% of the recommended 6<sup>th</sup> grade words and is willing to read more than I ask.

Key Reflection Questions: Can I keep my student engaged for additional literacy lessons? I think so, especially with books that are interesting to the student. So far, narrative books are preferred over other genres; but she will work with other genres, if I talk about the book with her.

Is the student I am tutoring enjoying and benefitting from our tutorial sessions? Yes, I think my student likes our tutoring time together and I am seeing growth in literacy skills and development, specifically with comprehension and story retelling. She is able to recall key events and details from the story and her language skills are improving. She decodes words and knows what to do if she comes to a tricky word.

Tutor D: Reflection / Another day

I feel that I had a good impact on my tutee today. I assessed him on the biography of “Young Orville and Wilbur Wright.” He did well with the comprehension questions. He compared the characters well and could recall details from the text.

Next, we worked with “Mountain Gorillas” to practice context clues. Expository texts are not his favorite type of books. At the conclusion of the lesson, I read The Napping House to him and he loved it! He did not want to leave tutorials until I finished the book, even though he was dismissed from tutorials. I observed the following literate behaviors on the books we read today. My student was engaged and learning.

Tutor D: Reflection:

- 1) Language Processing
- 2) Phonological Processing
- 3) Visual Processing
- 4) Use of background knowledge to construct meaning
- 5) Connecting reading & writing
- 6) Reading fluency
- 7) Attention to print
- 8) Memory
- 9) Processing Actions/ Cognitive Actions
- 10) Emotion & Motivation

### **Tutor E Reflection:**

Key Question: Did I positively impact the literate life of a child today? YES!! I shared that reading can be fun. We read The True Story of the Three Little Pigs and The Wreck of the Zephyr. The Three Little Pigs was a big hit. My student had read it before, but enjoyed reading it again. The Zephyr opened a door for us to talk about favorite books. It also gave us a little time to talk about what might happen and then what did happen. Our last book was Because of Winn Dixie- I bought it for her as a surprise and she was already reading it! We each read out of Winn-Dixie.

Goals: I want to work on building vocabulary, using context clues, and deeper understandings from reading: comprehension.

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